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ABSTRACT

Educators use the term "authentic assessment" to refer to the practice of realistic student involvement in the evaluation of student achievement. Authentic assessments are performance-based and instructionally appropriate. One method of authentic assessment is the assembly and review of a portfolio of a student's work. The portfolio is a record of a child's process of learning, and includes work samples, records of observations, and screening tests. Ideally, a portfolio includes observations in the following forms: (1) anecdotal records, which are useful for recording spontaneous events; (2) checklists or inventories, which should be based on the development associated with the acquisition of skills; (3) rating scales, which are used to measure behavior that has several components; (4) children's responses to questions; and (5) screening tests, which identify children's skills. Besides containing a wide variety of work samples, portfolios used in early childhood education should contain a statement of purpose. Once the material in a portfolio is organized by chronological order and category, the teacher can evaluate the child's achievements. Portfolios are not meant for comparing children to each other, but for documenting individual children's progress over time. The use of portfolios also provides teachers with a built-in system for planning parent-teacher conferences. (BC)

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The Portfolio and Its Use: Developmentally Appropriate Assessment of Young Children

Cathy Grace

The subject of children's achievement and performance in school, and even before school, has received increasing public attention during the latter 1980s and early 1990s. A general consensus for assessment reform is reflected by the volume and variety of professional literature on various methods of assessment and the number of states that are seeking alternative means to evaluate students.

Educators use the term *authentic assessment* to define the practice of realistic student involvement in evaluation of their own achievements. Authentic assessments are performance-based, realistic, and instructionally appropriate (Pett, 1990). One method of authentic assessment is to assemble and review a portfolio of the child's work.

The portfolio is a record of the child's process of learning: what the child has learned and how she has gone about learning; how she thinks, questions, analyzes, synthesizes, produces, creates; and how she interacts—intellectually, emotionally and socially—with others. Arter and Spandel (1991) define the portfolio as a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits to the student, or others, her efforts or achievement in one or more areas. According to Meisels and Steele (1991), portfolios enable children to participate in assessing their own work; keep track of individual children's progress; and provide a basis for evaluating the quality of individual children's overall performance. Wide use of portfolios can stimulate a shift in classroom practices and education policies toward schooling that more fully meets the range of children's developmental needs.

Components of the Young Child's Portfolio

The portfolio can include work samples, records of various forms of systematic observation, and screening tests. Engel (1990) emphasizes that "work samples meet the need for accountability while recognizing and supporting individual progress." They keep track of a child's progress—in other words, they follow the child's success rather than his failure. Teachers and parents can follow children's progress by reviewing children's writings, drawings, logs of books read by or to them, videos or photographs of large projects, tape recordings of the children reading or dictating stories, and so forth.

During systematic observation, young children should be observed when they are playing alone, in small groups, in large groups, at various times of day and in various circumstances. Systematic observation must be objective, selective, unobtrusive, and carefully recorded (Bertrand and Cebula, 1980). Ideally, a portfolio includes observations in several or all of the following forms:

Anecdotal records. Anecdotal records are factual, nonjudgmental notes of children's activity (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1991). They are most useful for recording spontaneous events. They should be cumulative, revealing insights about the child's progress when they are reviewed sequentially.

Checklist or inventory. The checklist or inventory is one of the easiest tools for recording children's progress. It should be based on instructional objectives and the development associated with the acquisition of the skills being monitored. In general, observations should be based on regular activities, not on specially designed or contrived activities.

Rating scales. Rating scales are appropriately used when the behavior to be observed has several aspects or components, such as a child's success at following directions in different situations.

Questions and requests. One of the most effective and easiest means of gathering information is to ask direct, open-ended questions of individual children. Open-ended requests such as, "I'd like you to tell me about this," elicit samples of the child's expressive language ability. Asking children about their activities also often yields insights into why they behave as they do.

Screening tests. Screening tests are used to help identify the skills and strengths that children already possess, so that teachers can plan meaningful learning experiences for their students. Findings of screening tests and developmental scales should be considered with work samples and other, more subjective, material that the teacher assembles in portfolios. The assessment information revealed by such instruments is not appropriately used for grading, labeling, grouping, or retaining children.

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Portfolio Authenticity

Decisions about what items to place in a portfolio should be based on the purpose of the portfolio. Without a purpose, a portfolio is just a folder of student work. The portfolio exists to make sense of children's work, to communicate about their work, and to relate the work to a larger context (Arter and Paulson, 1991; Paulson and Paulson, 1991). According to Murphy and Smith (1990), portfolios can be intended to motivate students, to promote learning through reflection and self-assessment, and to be used in evaluations of students' thinking and writing processes.

In early childhood education, portfolios should contain a statement of purpose and a wide variety of work samples, including successive drafts of work on particular projects. Children should be involved in choosing items to preserve so that they can analyze their work themselves.

Using the Portfolio in Evaluation

The material in a portfolio should be organized by chronological order and category. Since all information in the portfolio is dated, arranging the work samples, interviews, checklist, inventories, screening test results, and other information should be simple. Meisels and Steele (1991) suggest further organizing the material according to curriculum area or category of development (cognitive, gross motor, fine motor, and so forth).

Once the portfolio is organized, the teacher can evaluate the child's achievements. Appropriate evaluation always compares the child's current work to her earlier work. This evaluation should indicate the child's progress toward a standard of performance that is consistent with the teacher's curriculum and appropriate developmental expectations. Portfolios are not meant to be used for comparing children to each other. They are used to document individual children's progress over time. The teacher's conclusions about a child's achievement, abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and needs should be based on the full range of that child's development, as documented by the data in the portfolio, and on the teacher's knowledge of curriculum and stages of development.

The use of portfolios to assess young children provides teachers with a built-in system for planning parent-teacher conferences. With the portfolio as the basis for discussion, the teacher and parent can review concrete examples of the child's work, rather than trying to discuss the child's progress in the abstract.

Conclusion

Appropriate assessment of young children should involve the children themselves, parents, and teachers. The portfolio method promotes a shared approach to making decisions that will affect children's attitudes toward work and school in general. It frees the teacher from the constraints of standardized tests. Finally, using portfolios in assessment allows teachers to expand the classroom horizon and enlarge each child's canvas. Thus, the teacher can focus on the child and develop an intimate and enduring relationship with him.

For More Information

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